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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), a movement of radical theater and popular education designed for communities sharing common oppression, to help First Nations people return to and stabilize their mother tongues. It suggests that for many First Nations people, relearning their languages involves confronting histories of shame and fear surrounding their mother tongues. TO enables participants to tell their stories to one another in an aesthetic and visceral manner that cuts through over-intellectualization and strikes at their emotions and spirits. It can help create social change, as it challenges assumptions of the possible and helps people imagine non-oppressive realities. The paper suggests that collectively, Native people suffer from severe posttraumatic stress disorder, which makes the use of TO very important. It concludes that because of the high population of Native people living away from their homelands, language restoration must be able to provide language resources for as many native languages as possible. Because U.S. society does not encourage multilingualism, Native Americans tend to believe they cannot learn their heritage languages (an attitude not found in other areas of the world where people pick up new languages throughout their lives). Ten tips for teaching in Navajo immersion programs are included. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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Mothertongue: Incorporating Theatre of the Oppressed into Language Restoration Movements

Qwo-Li Driskill

As we dangle precariously on the edge of loss, First Nations people claw our fingers deep into earth to pull ourselves up, to dis-cover what has been destroyed and hidden during 510 years of European occupation of our homelands. Miraculously, we have survived mass genocide of our peoples and attempts to burn our lives and languages off the face of the planet. But it is not a survival that we carry without wounds, without scars of loss criss-crossing our skin. Sometimes we bare open wounds we find too terrifying and bloody to look at, and neglect them until they fester. In order to dis-cover and (re)learn the languages of our peoples, we must grapple with the history of genocide and compulsory assimilation that paved the road to language loss. We must use all the tools available in order to heal from and/or understand historical and personal trauma, to loosen the stones tied to our hands and blocking our mouths. Theatre of the Oppressed (TO), a movement of radical theatre and popular education founded by Brazilian actor and educator Augusto Boal, is one of many tools that holds promise for First Nations people to dislodge these stones and to return to and stabilize our Mothertongues.[1]

As educators, activists, writers and community members involved with language restoration movements, we continue to come up against obstacles in stabilizing our Mothertongues. For many First Nations people of the Americas and Hawai'i, relearning our languages is more than a study of verbs, nouns, and the ability to converse with other language speakers: It is a confrontation with histories of shame and fear surrounding our Mothertongues. It is grappling with the legacy of boarding/residential schools, missionaries, and colonial governments. It is healing from physical, sexual, psychic, and spiritual abuse as Native people. It is de-internalizing what we have been taught by white supremacy about our languages and our cultures and finding ways to resist racism, colonization, and the destruction of our traditions. Our efforts at learning and teaching languages is substantially different than educators and students teaching dominant languages such as Spanish, French, or German. We are not only hoping to effectively teach languages, we are working for the survival of our lifeways, our cultures, and our spiritual knowledges and hoping to help our people heal from invasion and genocide. Language revitalization projects working with youth and adult populations must not only work teaching Native languages, but must also engage in multidimensional approaches to the healing of our communities. Barbara-Helen Hill (Six Nations, Grand River Territory) writes in her important and powerful book *Shaking the Rattle: Healing from the Trauma of Colonization*, "To renew the spirit and heal the communities, we must start on an individual basis to heal the self" (p. 13). To add to Hill's statement, I believe that within First Nations contexts, healing of the self must happen within community. As an organizer and educator, I find TO a crucial tool for our individual and collective healing.

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From: J. Reyhner, O. Trujillo, R. L. Carrasco & L. Lockard (eds.). (2003). *Nurturing Native Languages* (pp. 155-163). Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University.

Theatre of the Oppressed and First Nations' struggles

While TO is being used in Native communities to articulate our struggles, little has been published about the ways we can use this brilliant body of work within our contexts.[2] Unlike traditional European forms of theatre, TO asks its actors to tell their own stories, express their own emotions, and discuss issues of importance with their communities. It is an interactive, rather than a presentational, form of theatre and is rooted within the individual and collective wisdom of its participants. Further, TO is a pedagogical tool that requires physical engagement with topics it is used to breech. TO requires "total physical response" and thus lends itself to language acquisition (see Cantoni, 1999).

Many language teachers realize the importance of integrating theatre into language curriculum as a pedagogical strategy, and TO spirals this concept out to another level: it enables its participants to tell their stories to one another in an aesthetic and visceral manner that cuts through over-intellectualization and strikes at our emotions and spirits. TO is an exceptional tool to help create social change, because it so often challenges our assumptions of the possible and helps us imagine non-oppressive realities. Craig Womack (Mvskoke/Cherokee) reminds us that, "the process of decolonizing the mind, a first step before one can achieve a political consciousness and engage oneself in activism, has to begin with the imagining of some alternative" (p. 230). Theatre is an instrument to help us envision those alternatives. If we can understand liberation in our bodies, we can take that understanding to every aspect of our lives. Not only can TO be used within language study, but also as a tool to examine the internalized emotions around our languages that often prevent us from returning to them. Because colonization takes place on a physical level, body-work[3] is critical to the transformation and decolonization of our bodies/minds/spirits. With its emphasis on body-work, and the many ways it challenges us to examine our realities, TO is a genre of theatre that holds an immense amount of promise for those of us working for our collective mending.

Highly influenced by Brazilian activist and popular educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Boal's goal was to create radical popular theatre that could bring about social change. Freire's concept of *conscientização*, which refers to the development of critical consciousness in regard to oppressive systems and the actions needed to take place to change them, is integral to Boal's theatre work. In 1964, Brazil fell to a military dictatorship, and in 1971 Boal was arrested and tortured for speaking out against the regime. Subsequently, he lived in Argentina where he continued to develop TO techniques until being exiled to Europe in 1976.

During the next ten years, Boal continued his TO work, trying to find ways to adapt it so that it could be utilized in European contexts. It was here that Boal began to develop techniques that were based on a more therapeutic model than previous TO work and created a new body of work, "Rainbow of Desire," sometimes just called "Rainbow," to further expand TO. In 1986 Boal returned to Brazil and continued his theatre work, and in 1992 was elected to the legislature

and began developing his newest theatre experiment, Legislative Theatre, which uses theatre as a vehicle for people to directly impact on democratic process.

TO is being widely practiced in the Americas and other continents. As practitioners come up against the ways Boal's original design must be changed in TO's shifting contexts, TO is redesigned to fit the needs of specific communities and cultures. In his foreword to *Theatre of the Oppressed,* Boal (1985, p. ix) writes that "...theatre can...be a weapon for liberation. For that, it is necessary to create appropriate theatrical forms." We must ask, "How appropriate are theatrical forms that are rooted in European traditions in Native contexts?" We must find ways to adapt TO techniques, or create new techniques, that embrace the complexities and struggles of Native lives. Working within contemporary theatre movements means we must subvert and re-invent theatre in order for it to be an effective tool of liberation. We must find theatrical forms that are rooted in tribal understandings, national struggles and pan-native concerns.

Those of us who are Native and involved in TO or other radical theatre work must strive to ensure that theatre evolves from radical Native aesthetics that can encompass our traditions, our experiences under colonialism, the ways in which we have been abused and the ways in which we have resisted exploitation. It is necessary that Native theatre be used to help the stability of future generations. It must be rooted in our histories and struggles, it must be conscious of its intent to heal and promote continuance and it must be connected to our communities.

Traditionally, Native theatrical forms take place within contexts of community survival and the sacred. In my own Cherokee tradition, the Booger Dance exists to help ritualize shifting realities for our tribe in the face of colonialism and gives us a chance to laugh at what we most fear.[4] In the Booger Dance, Boogers appear in the middle of a gathering wearing comical masks representing various outsiders to the tribe. The term Booger comes from the word English word "bogey," a ghost. I mention the Booger Dance here, because I feel that in many ways it is a perfect metaphor for the needs in contemporary Native theatre. The Booger Dance is rooted in Cherokee struggles, Cherokee fears, and Cherokee community. Its purpose is to heal. In fact, the Booger Dance is sometimes prescribed by medicine people to help overcome sickness (Speck & Broom p. 37). Booger Dances, like other Cherokee dances, dramas and rituals are a community event. They emerge from the needs of the community in order to ensure survival and continuance.

By using TO as a tool for language restoration and other needs of Native communities, we help create theatre that serves similar multiple functions. My work as a Native TO facilitator working with other Native people continues to teach me an immense amount about the potential of this work to heal our communities and the specific realities First Nations people face using TO. In my own experiences, I find that facilitating TO with other Native people tends to be more intense, more emotional and more transformative than when facilitating TO with people not sharing a common oppression. This is not only because TO was created for communities facing a common oppression, but also because

Native people are survivors of intense tribal and personal histories under colonial governments and TO sparks powerful feelings and reactions to these histories.

I had a fairly surprising experience the first time I facilitated TO with an all-Native group. There is a fairly standard warm-up exercise often called "Cover the Space," in which participants are asked to walk around the space fairly briskly and try to make sure no space is left uncovered while remaining equidistant from other participants (Boal, 1992, p. 116). There are several variations of this exercise, and I asked participants to be aware of their own bodies, and to notice how they felt within them as they walked around the room. I then asked participants to create a vocalization on how they were feeling at that moment and to exaggerate their emotions through their bodies. The result caught me off guard: All of the participants began to moan or scream, and their movements became heavy and slow, as if they were carrying huge weights on their limbs. While I asked them to shift directions and embody the opposite of that emotion, I still found we needed to have a discussion to process the first exercise, which is usually considered low impact. Some of the participants, I found out later, began crying as soon as I asked them to be aware of themselves in their bodies.

I believe that collectively Native people suffer from severe Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is further impacted by our personal experiences with trauma. Simply asking us to be present in our own bodies can be a frightening, and also healing, experience. Many of us were taught that we have no right to our own bodies, which directly relates to being taught that we have no right to our homelands, languages, or lifeways. For me, this experience was further evidence of how important TO work is within Native communities. In the case of language restoration, for example, how can we hope for our peoples to learn our languages if we are not able to be present within our bodies? How can we heal these deep wounds so we can embrace our Mothertongues? Conversely, how can our Mothertongues be used as medicinals on our journey toward personal, community and cultural restoration?

I began developing a workshop called *Mothertongue: Healing from Patriarchy and Colonization* for a conference in Eugene, Oregon called *Against Patriarchy* in January 2002. I wanted to create a space for people of color (Native and non-Native) to examine the ways patriarchy and colonization are intertwined forms of violence and how returning to our Mothertongues can help us repair the personal, spiritual and psychological damage that are the results of systemic violence. I conducted a shorter version of the workshop at the Ninth Annual Stabilizing Indigenous Languages Symposium in Bozeman, Montana in 2002, the first time the workshop was done in a context of people already concerned with issues of language restoration and stabilization.

The workshop had 35 participants, far more than I expected to attend a workshop involving theatre, and contained a vastness of stories that would have been impossible to hear in such a short amount of time without using a tool like TO. I asked participants to break into small groups and create human sculptures[5] around their relationships with their ancestral languages. Through TO,

we were able to see deeper complexities in our relationships with our languages than we would have in a simple discussion. One group of women from a community that feels their language is in a strong place stood in a circle, palm to palm in a celebratory gesture. Another group was sculpted to show the way a participant felt as an advocate for a language for which there are no fluent speakers. One woman sculpted the pain she felt as someone who doesn't know her language by sculpting herself with her hand over her mouth. There were infinite layers to our relationships with our Mothertongues varying from joyous to devastated.

One of the stories that surfaced during the workshop was from a woman who explained how her community is split over the issue of language restoration. To illustrate this conflict, she created an image of two people facing away from two others, placing herself in the middle. TO, she observed later, would be a key instrument in resolving conflicts that exist in her Nation and communicating the underlying emotions around these conflicts in an effort to create fertile ground for language stabilization. Others observed that Image Theatre is valuable because it doesn't use spoken language, making it an important resource to bridge language barriers within their communities.

Because I work with multi-tribal groups, my TO workshops usually don't incorporate Native languages but rather examine our relationships to our languages, traditions, and histories. However, there is no reason that TO shouldn't incorporate our Mothertongues. In 2001 a course called "Literacy and Drama in Aboriginal Language Education" was offered through the Canadian Indigenous Languages and Literacy Development Institute (see Blair, Paskemin, & Laderoute, this volume) which incorporated what Diana Steinhauer (Cree) describes as "contextual theatre" into its curriculum, resulting in a community performance in Cree called *Waniskâtân*. Instructors Maureen Belanger and Lon Borgerson used a process similar to TO in order to create play based on the stories of participants to share with the community (Stienhauer, 2001).

In my own work and in the stories I hear from other Native folks, theatre is a potent approach to language stabilization, and a genre such as TO lends itself to our work by helping us repair the damage caused by colonization and abuse and pushes us to envision our futures.

On the Edge of the Field I Dance About: Trickster solutions to daunting obstacles

In Cherokee and other First Nations traditions of what is currently being called the Southeastern United States, our trickster figure is Tsis'du (Rabbit). Like all of our stories, trickster tales offer important lessons for our lives, and I believe they should be turned to in times of crisis in order to create solutions to the problems we face in our communities.[6]

> *Now, Tsis'du is always getting into some sort of trouble. Tsis'du can be just minding his own business and trouble will come tapping on his shoulder and wanting to play. Once, Tsis'du (who is a great dancer) was dancing in*

a clearing of a forest when a whole pack of hungry wolves surrounded him. They wanted to eat him all up with their sharp teeth. "Howa,"[7] said Tsis'du. "But don't you first want to learn this wonderful dance?" The wolves agreed, they love dancing, and Tsis'du began to teach them. He stomped his feet and started singing,

Tlage'situn' gali'sgi'sida'ha
Ha'nia lil! Lil! Ha'nia lil! Lil!
(On the edge of the field I dance about
Ha'nia lil! Lil! Ha'nia lil! Lil!)

"So," said Tsis'du, "When I sing 'On the edge of the field I dance about,' I will dance toward those trees, and when I sing 'Lil!,' y'all are supposed to close your eyes and stomp with all of your strength! Got it?" And with that, Tsis'du began singing and dancing, all the while moving closer and closer to the trees while the wolves stomped loudly with their eyes closed. Tsis'du danced, the wolves stomped. Tsis'du danced, the wolves stomped. Tsis'du danced, the wolves stomped. Tsis'du danced, the wolves stomped until finally Tsis'du was at the very edge of the clearing and dashed into the trees with the angry wolves close at his paws. He found a hollow in a tree and squeezed inside of it. One of the wolves stuck his head into the hollow, trying to pull Tsis'du out and Tsis'du spit right in his face. Thinking Tsis'du was trying to put a curse on them with his spit, the wolves backed away from the tree and let Tsis'du alone. That's all.[8]

This story is an example of a creative solution to crisis. Trickster thinking involves clever and imaginative responses to situations that seem impossible. As language activists we must integrate trickster thinking into our lives and vocations. We must think like Tsis'du and other tricksters to effectively respond to our present crisis.

Those of us doing language work in urban contexts have challenges that reservation communities may not face. We are working with Native people from many Nations, many of whom are living away from our homelands. Considering the high population of Native people living in cities, language restoration movements within the "urban rez" must be able to provide language resources for as many Native languages as possible. For instance, one of my personal obstacles in (re)learning my languages in Seattle is that most speakers of my Mothertongues live in Oklahoma or North Carolina. Many of the Native people I use TO with through Knitbone Productions[9] in Seattle are in similar situations. While I am still learning Cherokee through books and tapes, they are no substitution for language classrooms and language immersion.

One of the many obstacles that we face with Native languages in the United States is the fact that dominant US culture does not support multilingualism. Because we are not taught to learn new languages as children, and there is a prevailing attitude that there is no reason for Americans to learn any other language than English, learning a new language is a daunting concept for many people. I find that many of the Native people I speak with believe it is almost

impossible to learn their languages, and I believe that notion is rooted in the idea that learning languages can't be done as adults. This is not the attitude I find in people from many other places in the world who are raised multilingual and pick-up new languages throughout their lives. We must find ways to ease the fears people have about learning languages if we are to hope our languages will remain vigorous.

Promoting the use and stabilization of Native languages must not become an isolated, academic field if we truly hope our Mothertongues will continue and flourish. We must collaborate with other movements happening in the Native community in order to share resources and tactics. For instance, many Native psychologists, therapists, and activists are looking at the ways we can heal from historical trauma and are pursuing new fields of study and practice that can encompass colonization and decolonization. The Northwest Indian Prevention & Intervention Research Core (NIPIRC) of Oregon Social Learning Center, for instance, sponsors an annual conference called "Healing Our Wounded Spirits."[10] The work that occurs in this conference is directly connected with our work as language activists, and it is imperative that we all begin to coalition around issues facing our communities. What, for instance, would it look like to create a form of therapy that specifically integrated language restoration? Disciplines such as music therapy, art therapy, and psychodrama already exist. What would language therapy look like and entail? This is just one idea that comes to my mind when I think of the ways our movements can share knowledge with each other.

Trickster thinking leads us to ask, "What haven't we tried yet? What solutions are waiting within us that we haven't realized?" In the story above, Tsis'du uses his skills and talent as a singer and dancer to escape a life-threatening situation. Creative solutions rest on the talents we already possess, even if we don't understand immediately how they relate to the present problem. Trickster thinking involves manifesting creative solutions in response to seemingly impossible situations. This is one of the reasons TO carries hope to our language struggles: it requires innovative thinking and action and taps into knowledge we already carry inside of us. TO enables all of us to think like tricksters by allowing us to organically convey our emotions and ideas within the moment. TO is flexible to the needs of our classrooms and communities. It is a device that can be used to promote language acquisition through total physical response, address isssues of historical trauma, and communicate effectively across differences. Like Tsis'du, we sing and dance our way from the dangerous edge of loss into the warm shelter of our Mothertongues.

Notes

[1]I have decided to use this term, rather than "mother tongue," to point out the specific relationship First Nations people have with our languages, regardless of whether or not we speak them as our first language. Though our Native languages may not be, in a linguistic sense, our mother tongues, they are nevertheless the languages from which we originate. In addition, I use this term to

draw attention to the vital roles mothers play in carrying language from one generation to the next. [2]The only work I am familiar with published about Native communities and TO is "Out of the Silence: Headlines Theatre and Power Plays" by non-Native theatre artist David Diamond in *Playing Boal: Theatre, Therapy, Activism.* (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz, pp. 35-52) While Diamond's essay is an important contribution, I long to see more published work about TO in Native communities by First Nations people.

[3]I understand body-work as being any knowledge obtained on a kinesthetic level.

[4]European anthropologists that have researched my tribe often claim that the Booger Dance was instigated after contact with European invaders, because white people and other non-Cherokee people (including Asians, African-Americans and non-Cherokee Native folks) are portrayed in the Booger Dance. According to our own historical knowledge, however, the Booger Dance was given to us long before colonization as a way to protect ourselves from invasion. For more on the Booger Dance, Frank G. Speck and Leonard Broom's *Cherokee Dance and Drama* (University of Oklahoma) is informative, though very Eurocentric.

[5]See Boal's (1992) section on Image Theatre in *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (pp.164-201).

[6]In a personal conversation with Daniel H. Justice (Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma), he pointed out that Tsis'du is a very different character than other First Nations tricksters such as Coyote. Tsis'du doesn't have the generative power other tricksters possess to rebalance foolish choices. Tsis'du's bravado and arrogance eventually gets him stuck on the other side of an ocean, perhaps in the Ghostland. I think this is an important consideration with all trickster stories and the lessons they give us as cultural workers. Sometimes tricksters teach us how to behave and sometimes they teach us how *not* to behave. Our stories take on meaning through what we can learn from them and I believe we can learn vital lessons from trickster stories that aid us in cultural restoration and continuance, especially in states of crisis. It is also important to note that Tsis'du plays a more favorable and central role within my own Black Cherokee oral traditions than he may in other Cherokee traditions. Wa'do to Denili/Daniel for this conversation.

[7]Okay.

[8]This version of the story is my own, drawn from the versions told by Gayle Ross (Cherokee) in *How Rabbit Tricked Otter and Other Cherokee Trickster Stories* (pp. 24-28) and James Mooney in *History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (p. 274).

[9]Knitbone Productions is an organization I founded in Seattle for First Nations people of the Americas and Hawai'i to use writing, theatre and story as tools for healing, decolonization and continuance.

[10]NIPIRC can be reached at 160 East 4th Avenue, Eugene Oregon, 97402.

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Recommended Texts

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Rohd, Michael. (1998). *Theatre for community, conflict & dialogue: The hope is vital training manual.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Additional Resources

The Centre for Indigenous Theatre, 401 Richmond Street West - Suite 260, P.O. Box 75, Toronto, Ontario M5V 1X3, Canada. www.indigenoustheatre.com

Headlines Theatre, #323-350 East 2nd Ave., Vancouver, BC V5T 4R8, Canada. www.headlinestheatre.com

The Mandala Center for Awareness, Transformation and Action, 1221 49th St., Port Townsend, WA 98368. www.mandalaforchange.com

Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed, P. O. Box 31623, Omaha, NE 68131-0623. www.unomaha.edu/~pto/

Knitbone Productions, 1816 Bellevue Ave., #205, Seattle, WA 98122.

Ten Tips for Teaching in Navajo Immersion Programs

1. **You gotta believe!** A timid self-conscious use of Navajo communicates to the students that the teacher doesn't really believe in what s/he's doing. If the teacher doesn't believe in this, or doesn't really expect the students to be able to do this, the students will sense this. The will rise only to the teacher's low level of expectation. You've got to communicate confidence and expectation—even if you don't quite feel them yourself at first.
2. **Stay in Navajo.** Teacher uses only Navajo. Teacher not only teaches in Navajo but also gives directions in Navajo and interacts with students in Navajo. The teacher creates a fully-Navajo language-environment.
3. **Expect Students to talk Navajo.** Teacher must create a situation where students need Navajo: not just for instruction but also in communication with the teacher and interacting with the teacher. Teacher should set up instruction where students *must* talk Navajo to each other as well. The teacher should *encourage* students to communicate and interact with one another in Navajo as well.
4. **Focus on doing things here and now.** Describing things is all right—but isn't terribly useful in getting things done. Recounting stories is all right—but telling what happened in the past doesn't help you know how to get things done now. Writing stories is all right—but it has the same problems as telling stories do plus students aren't talking while writing. Focus on the language needed to get things done here and now.
5. **Focus on verbs.** Too many teachers teach only lists of nouns. Teachers should focus on verbs that are needed to get things done here and now: the action words of commands and requests.
6. **Focus on only a few verbs**—sometimes only one—in a given lesson. Over several lessons, give students several forms of that verb. You want them to 'sense' the system of making verbs. You want them to try out verb-forms they've never heard. Some of the time—hopefully most of the time—they'll be right. But you don't really learn language until you strike out on your own.
7. **Expect all students to talk meaningfully.** In some classes, teachers do talk all Navajo. Students respond in chorus if at all. One sees few students initiate communication in Navajo. Insist that students respond when spoken to, even if only to ask for help. It may be 'boring' to a teacher to make time for everyone to 'say it' in a meaningful situation. But if the teacher focuses on helping the students say and understand these things for real communication—s/he won't have time to become bored.
8. **Keep it simple/consistent.** It's hard for many Navajo-speakers to realize just how hard all this is for non- or limited-Navajo speakers. Take small chunks; build on them. Be fairly consistent. Being consistent doesn't mean you can't make it fun.
9. **Support and encourage students** to try new verbs-forms in their own sentences. Students learn by trying to communicate. It trying out a new language, students will make mistakes. But if they're too embarrassed to even try, they won't learn much. Don't laugh at students' mistakes. Use tactful ways to correct students. Really encourage students to 'take risks.
10. **Plan/assess/test.** In laying out a lesson, be explicit what you expect students to be able to do at the end of that lesson. Teachers are often surprised at how small they must 'chunk' these expectations. In the course of a lesson, or at the end of the lesson, formally or informally test all the students. Have the courage to plan the next lesson based on how the assessment of the last lesson turned out. If it's important, don't go on until almost everone can do it. [WH NNLP 09/98]

—Navajo Nation Language Project, Division of Diné Education. *Directory of Secondary Navajo Language Programs*, 2000-2001, pp. 116-.

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